

# "My Husband," Vernon Castle's Life as His Wife Knew It



Her Memoir a Love Story Such as Could Be Written Only by the "Sweetheart" of His Letters From Camp and the Front—Reviews His Meteoric Career as a Dancer and His Heroic Work and Death as Army Aviator

By HARRY ESTEY DOUNCE.

AN airplane manned by an instructor and a cadet was about to land safely on a Texas flying field when another machine, piloted by a student, rose just in front. The instructor, who was riding in the front seat, made what is called an Immelman turn in order to avoid a collision.

"Those who saw the accident say that, possessing as he did so perfect an understanding of flying, the instructor must have been certain that the forty feet between him and the ground was not enough space in which to make the turn. It was enough, however, to avoid cleverly the other machine. His own crashed, nose down. The instructor, Vernon Castle, was killed."

### The Civilian Castle.

"Certain papers," she continues in relating the accident, "put it that Vernon Castle had made good by his glorious self-sacrifice. Their idea seemed to be that by his death Vernon Castle had atoned for his earlier sins, whatever they may have been. It seemed inconceivable to them that a dancer—a professional dancer—and man of the stage—could be a fighter."

He was not, says his wife, a fighter in the sense that he liked war. "He was not a soldier of adventure nor of any other kind. He hated discipline and the restrictions attached to a life in barracks. He loved above all other surface things the theatre, restaurants, cafes and other places of amusement. All this he gave up gladly because his country was at war and he was too good a sport to shirk his share of the hardship and dangers that are the lot of a soldier."

There was the Vernon Castle whom all this continent knew, and so did France of other lands abroad. That was the civilian Castle, Castle of Castle House and "The Sunshine Girl" and the whirlwind tour—on which last, assisted by Mrs. Castle and two or three couples of their associated instructors in modern dancing, and accompanied by the rattle orchestra of one James Reese Europe, whose surname seemed geographically misplaced (he's now Lieut. Jim Europe, bandmaster in chief to Col. Bill Hayward's dusky heroes)—on which, to repeat, being thus assisted and accompanied, young Mr. Castle taught the whole country what maxims and one-step dancing and such could be when tastefully done.

### The Soldier Castle.

And there was Vernon Castle in English khaki, ornamented with the alman's silver wings—Capt. Vernon Castle, this, who bagged his German airplane more than once in fair fight aloft, and as an instructor of pilots probably did better service, both in quantity and quality, than any tremendous number of English speaking instructors did; and who at last in Texas, as Mrs. Castle has described, died a finer death than most of us who survive him are likely to be granted.

And then there was a third, Vernon Castle himself, the man inside or behind the meteoric public character. This man possibly one person knew for each million who knew the others, and of course no one knew him as well as the "Sweetheart" of his letters from camp and front. It is to reveal him somewhat, while the world is still remembering who Vernon Castle was, her book, published by Charles Scribner's Sons, with many of the letters in it.

### Bugaboo of the Theatre.

"There is a bugaboo in the American theatre," she writes, "that will not die easily, and that is that a performer is like the part he plays. Women who play vampires on the stage or in the movies are credited by a part of the public with knowing their business from the inside and to be personally guilty of everything except, perhaps, arson. So a man who plays a fool must be a fool."

There is another bugaboo that Mrs. Castle naturally does not mention, and that is pushed over by her memoir quite as effectively. It is the abominable notion that all professional people who do anything on the stage, or in any line as entertainers, are people of the lowest sort of private lives; and that when you see a married couple associated in such work and conspicuously devoted you can make up your mind the devotion is a sham for business reasons.

### Her Book a Love Story.

The case of the Castles was an utter confounding of cynics with these views. The book is a love story, and Vernon Castle's letters are love letters, every one—fond, foolish, love letters, full of happy memory and wistful anticipation—letters the writer never dreamed would come to light in print, but which, having done so, constitute something of a public service.

Vernon Blyth (the name Castle was assumed) was born in Norwich, England, and had the schooling that the town afforded. He was the only boy in a family where there were four girls, all older and all of whom adored him. His mother died when he was quite young, and neither his sisters nor his father ever spanked him in his life, and I am told that when he wouldn't eat anything or wear something he had bought for him they had only to tell him it "came from France" to have it meet with approval in his eyes.

"Like many another small boy, he one day strung the house with electric bells and wires. He immediately was stamped in the family as an electrical engineer, though I never saw him show any knowledge of electricity in later years, and he certainly never offered to wire our house with bells. Nor did he ever have any suggestions for repairing them when they were out of order."

In London the youngster was fascinated by the bill at St. George's Hall, made up of sleight-of-hand; he hung around the place till he had learned to do simple tricks and had seen through more pretentious ones; and before he was 20 he was conjuring as a business and appearing at clubs and other private entertainments.

### Young Vernon Likes New York.

In the summer of 1906, with his father, his sister and brother-in-law, Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence Grossmith—the latter an English actor of reputation—he came to New York, where the Grossmiths were to play in "The Orchid." The others didn't like our Manhattan bustle and hurly-burly, but young Vernon got used to it, and, says Mrs. Castle, "the tremendous vitality and energy he developed left the way behind. After he had made America his home for a time there was no one who could keep up with him."

"He rode and swam harder than any

one else and could outlast any one at a party, requiring very little sleep and despatching more than anything an idle moment. He seemed absolutely tireless, and more alive than any one I have ever known."

### She Wanted to Go on the Stage.

She wanted to go on the stage. She says he was very nice about it. But he finally did take an interest and help her, and she made an inconspicuous debut in a Fields company. In March, 1911, they were engaged. Father Foote liked Vernon but felt that actors as a class never had any money and that a little of it was fairly essential. He also had objections on principle to international marriages. This one took place in May.

### Thoughtless, but Likable.

He was thoughtless, Mrs. Castle owns, but "no one was ever cross with him, not even process servers." She tells of one who, near their Manhattan home, jumped on the running board of their car, "and served him with a summons to appear in court on a \$30,000 suit that had been brought against us."

### Their First Dance.

After Mrs. Castle joined "The Hen-Pecks" they did a dance together in the show as an encore to one of Vernon Castle's songs. She thinks it was the first time they ever did dance together, publicly or privately, and they never rehearsed it, although they wrote it out in advance, as later became their practice. "Necessity made us do it. It was not until we got to Paris that necessity urged us."

### They First Met in Paris.

The Vernon Castle thus intimately portrayed is simply a care free, lither, some, full grown boy, irresistibly likable and utterly irresponsible in any business way. When they contemplated going to Paris, largely on their own hook, in response to an offer of engagement from a French manager: "He was interested in everything, and to go abroad on the little money we had saved seemed quite all right. I, the more practical of the two, was caught and deceived by his enthusiasm. Then, he thought it would be amusing, and he loved being amused. Just as he loved to amuse. To the theatre he went, no matter how ill he was. He never quite got over the beginner's love of the theatre's back stage."

"The people he met there all interested him and they worshipped

### him, just as the people did who met him in restaurants and cafes. I have never heard of any one who disliked him, and I don't believe he really disliked any one either, but he could get most delightfully bored; things had to keep up a pretty lively tempo to hold his interest, and even those he loved bored him at times."

### A First Rate Drummer.

The allusion to little drums is not a figure. As every one knows who had attended a dancing exhibition by the Castles with their own orchestra Vernon Castle was a first class drummer and trap player, and unaffectedly fond of displaying his art. Mrs. Castle tells how he used to practice in their apartment until riots must have been imminent outside, how he liked to change places with "Buddie," Europe's drummer, how in camp, as an army aviator, he used to brighten the life for his fellows with entertainments, some of them single handed, in which his drumming was always a popular feature.

### They First Met in Paris.

Their first summer in Paris was the summer before the war, and they had rough sledding, in a modest apartment under eaves, on pittance salaries—which were always blown in for celebrations as soon as received, or sooner—and with Walter, an old negro servant, finding for them as Mousqueton did for Porchus, on no wages, and "Zowie," their English bulldog, subsisting always on the best they had, with a besetment to himself on festive nights. Mind you: this is the summer of 1913. Within three years Vernon Castle was to be handling probably more money than any other man of his age in the world was making by his own efforts, and within five years he was to have fought in, and perished by, the war that made them hapless refugees the following summer in France.

### Finally in 1915, at the suggestion of an agent, they sought and connected

### with an opportunity to try out as cabaret dancers in the Cafe de Paris.

With their try out the wondrous tide of the Castles' success turned and began to come in.

### Heidway of the Castles.

The inside of the Castle heyday in New York, and then, by way of their book on dancing and their tour, extended throughout the country, is narrated entertainingly; we remember these things from outside so well, "Sans Souci," "Castles in the Air," "Castles by the Sea" at Long Beach and the rest of it, all figure in the book, with a wealth of anecdote and incident.

"While we were living at Mar-hasset Vernon took up polo and the showing of German sheepdogs. He played polo with his wonted enthusiasm and fearlessness. He liked all games except cricket, of which he complains in one of his letters from the training camp in England. Cricket he thought a shade worse than baseball."

### He never became a remarkable polo player, but he loved the game and spent a great deal of time on his ponies. His kennels of police dogs gained some reputation, but these with the exception of Tell von Flueger, his very famous wolf dog of all field trials, were sold when he gave up his profession to go to war. He adored Tell, and thought of taking him with him, but he feared that something might happen to him and that there would be no one to care for Tell out there if he did. It was one of his greatest joys on being sent to Canada as an instructor to the Royal Flying Corps that he could have Tell with him again. Jeffrey, his monkey, he also had in Canada, and a little parakeet I had given him because he had taken such a fancy to him on one of his visits home.

### "No one ever showed the patience Vernon did in travelling back and forth with his family of pets. He wasn't embarrassed at carrying huge cages through railway stations, and spent most of his time en route in the baggage car."

### Indeed Vernon Castle's devotion to his pets and theirs to him is one of the most appealing sides of his nature in this revelation. Dogs and monkeys, especially monkeys, were his favorites, and when Mrs. Castle went to London to be near the camp where he was and he flew across the Channel from France—

### "He served wrapped in a leather coat and many monkeys. From the inside of his coat peeped the comely little face of a monkey which was his mascot at the front. Vernon picked him up in Paris at a Red Cross bazaar. No one else wanted to buy him, and he had looked so

### pathetic—Vernon could never resist such an appeal.

"Of course they became the best of friends, and this particular monkey acquired quite a reputation as a flier in Vernon's squadron. He had named him Hallel after a song Bert Williams sang and had dressed him in a little khaki soldier suit. Hallel held the long distance flight record for monkeys, having flown from Paris to Lilleul, where Vernon's squadron was stationed."

### "One of the funniest things he did was to try and make Vernon go to bed promptly. As soon as he came in at night Hallel would jump up and down on the bed and cry, running in under the covers and out again until Vernon got into bed; then Hallel would snuggle on his chest and grumble and grunt and talk to himself with contentment until he fell asleep. His death was a sad loss, and Vernon wrote me after he got back to France of how he missed Hallel, and what sorrow it had awakened in his heart to find all his little things about his shack."

### He Makes Good.

"He told me that he felt much like a child, who, having been severely punished, hopes to be run over in the street so that his parents may feel truly sorry for their cruel harsh treatment. He got into his machine very hurt and angry, but determined that he should not be sneered at a second time, and so flying low in a straight line over the German front and never wavering in his course (though on such missions the flier is supposed to circle around after each picture to make it more difficult for the gunners below) he took his twenty-four pictures all over again. Flying bits of shell tore holes in the planes of his machine, one bit went through the collar of his coat, and finally his rudder was so badly tipped away that he had great difficulty in landing."

### "I doubt if on this trip he ever heard the guns booming, for his mind was so determined and his heart so wounded. When he landed his machine told the story, and the splendid pictures he turned in were proof of his courage. The proudest part of this little story is that his commanding officer and he became fast friends from then on. It was he who finally sent Vernon to Canada after he had had a bad fall in France, for fear something might happen to him."

### A considerable part of Mrs. Castle's memoir is taken up with her husband's letters to her. They tell of the incidents of an army aviator's life, and something of his combats, &c. But mainly they tell his wife how much he loved her, and although she has published them it would seem not far short of sacrilege to reprint them in this place.

### His Pictures Make No Hit.

"He was much concerned and distracted by the bursting shells. . . . In order to prevent the guns below from getting a direct range he zig-zagged and flew all around the



MRS. CASTLE IN ONE OF HER MOST ATTRACTIVE POSES

CAPT VERNON CASTLE, ROYAL FLYING CORPS, KILLED IN SERVICE

Loving All the Gay Things in Life, He Cheerfully Gave Them Up to Bear the Hardships of a Soldier—His Fads and Fancies

country between each picture. He was very shaky about it all and not a little distressed, but finally he got what he thought he had been sent for and flew home, radiant with the satisfaction of a job well done.

"The next morning his commanding officer sent for him and said: 'Castle, did you take those pictures?' Vernon saluted him in a true soldier fashion, and said, 'Yes, sir,' with great pride in his voice, expecting to have something pinned on his chest. Then, to his surprise and disappointment, the officer tore up the pictures and told Vernon they were hopelessly out of focus, crooked and worthless. He used rather strong language and left no doubt in Vernon's mind about the failure of his little expedition over the German lines."

"Then he demanded to know why Vernon hadn't done better. By this time Vernon, thoroughly humbled, explained that they had been firing on him pretty heavily and that he had been forced to abandon his bursting shells. This, it seems, was the worst thing he could have said."

"His squadron commander was a man of boundless courage. He knew no fear; he had attracted a great deal of attention because of his bravery in flying, and he had only contempt for those who admitted the slightest fear. All this Vernon learned afterward from his fellow fliers."

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